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RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4126
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RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 007483

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TAGS: KJUS PGOV PREL PINR PTER CO

SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTIONS CLIMATE IN CUCUTA: CRIME AND BORDER
ISSUES

REF: BOGOTA 7225

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Cucuta, the capital of Norte de Santander, is a major transit point to Venezuela, making it a magnet for illegal armed groups trying to control legal and illegal commercial activity. Its mayor was arrested in September for paramilitary ties, but he remains highly popular. Election preparations are proceeding smoothly in the city, with voter turnout expected to be high. Still, campaigning remains difficult in rural areas due to threats from criminal bands and the FARC. End Summary.

CUCUTA - PARAMILITARY HISTORY

¶2. (U) Cucuta, capital of Norte de Santander department on the border with Venezuela, was once a staging ground for paramilitaries and still suffers from a high crime rate. El Tiempo reported 327 killings in Cucuta from January-September 2007, up from 259 during the same period in 2006, largely due to battles between emerging criminal bands. Wildredo Canizares, director of the non-governmental group Fundacion Progresar, compared Cucuta's current violence to the period between 1999 and 2004, when paramilitaries fought the FARC and ELN for control of the city. Paramilitaries reportedly murdered over 5000 people in Norte de Santander before their demobilization in 2004. Victims included a CTI agent, Cucuta's DAS director, and a human rights ombudsman. More recently, a Fiscalia investigator was shot and killed in Cucuta on September 15, apparently by the illegal criminal band Aguilas Negras.

¶3. (U) In September, Cucuta Mayor Ramiro Suarez was arrested for paramilitary ties for the second time--a 2004 investigation was dismissed for lack of evidence. Suarez remains popular as a politician who rose from humble origins as a mechanic and taxi driver. He received the highest number of votes in the city's history in 2003. The Fiscalia is currently investigating him for paramilitary ties that implicate him in the 2003 murder of Alfredo Florez, a mayoral adviser. Former paramilitary Carlos Andres Palencia

implicated Suarez from Combita prison, saying Suarez authorized Florez' assassination. Former paramilitary Bloque Fronteras leader Jorge Ivan Laverde (aka El Iguano) has also testified that Suarez promised him a political position in return for helping him get elected.

VOLATILE FRONTIER PROBLEMS

¶4. (C) Local International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) representative Gilles Cerutti told us the region has long been a contraband corridor for petroleum and arms, leading to a culture of corruption. Cucuta has experienced an economic boom over the past five years, with most locals giving Suarez the credit. Glittering shopping centers and luxury fitness centers dot the landscape of this sleepy border town, where cheap gasoline from Venezuela is sold in plastic bottles on every street corner. Cerutti said it is likely some funding for new businesses comes from narcotrafficking sources and illegal business activity.

¶5. (U) On October 1, more than 1000 protesters gathered at the Simon Bolivar international bridge point that connects Cucuta to Venezuela to protest the new \$1 border crossing toll. Alleged members of illegal criminal bands burned toll booths, threw rocks, and vandalized vehicles parked nearby. The border point was reopened on October 12, a day after President Uribe visited Cucuta and called for alternative measures to the toll. The disruption caused major financial damage, affecting thousands of vehicles carrying goods and day laborers that pass through this point daily.

ELECTION PREPARATIONS CONTINUE SMOOTHLY

¶6. (C) William Villamizar Laguado (Conservative) leads the race for governor against regional party candidate Luz Adriana Quiroga Wilches from Movimiento Apertura Liberal (MAL). Villamizar us Cucuta has a history of strong Conservative Party support. He did not criticize former mayor Suarez, saying he never had problems when dealing with him on city issues. Villamizar attributed local economic growth to high consumer demand, the former mayor's drive to attract investment, and the local shoe manufacturing industry. Crimes by narcotraffickers and illegal criminal bands remain a serious problem, and he travels with seven bodyguards when campaigning in rural areas. He said neither he nor Quiroga has received any threats in Cucuta.

¶7. (C) Quiroga said the MAL broke away from the local Liberal party fourteen years ago and is a Norte del Santander-based party. She said the paramilitary demobilization has created more opportunities for smaller parties. Her MAL associate, Beatriz Adriana Jaimes Mora, is running for mayor in a field that includes the U party, Movimiento Alianza Social Indigena and Polo Democratico Alternative. Still, Quiroga complained local media favor Villamizar and often portray him as the sole gubernatorial candidate. She said Suarez, who maintains a personality cult in Cucuta, supports Villamizar from prison. Quiroga added that departmental and council candidates in rural areas north of Cucuta, including Tibu and Villa del Rosario, have received threats from both criminal bands and the FARC.

¶8. (C) Despite increased crime, the paramilitary scandal and border problems, election preparations appear to be proceeding relatively smoothly in the city. Local registrar Aurora Morantes said she has not witnessed any security problems or received any complaints from candidates. She believed voters will choose candidates based on personality and platforms instead of party affiliation. Morantes predicted a record voter turnout of 65% in Cucuta due to improved security and transparency. Registrars are setting up 1385 voting tables in Cucuta that will each service 300 voters.

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